



What Does It Mean? Contemplating Rita and Desiring Dead Bodies in two short stories by Raymond Carver

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When he holds me now, I'm pretending.

"Everything's Turning to White," Paul Kelly.

When *Jindabyne*, an Australian film directed by Ray Lawrence, was released in July 2006 reading Raymond Carver's "So Much Water So Close to Home" was reframed in an Australian context, hence the epigraph taken from lyrics by Australian songwriter Paul Kelly. Indeed, Kelly's 1989 album *So Much Water So Close to Home* contains a number of tracks recounting the story of love gone sour and of a man's loss of his affection, including the well-known "Sweet Guy," "Careless" and the song containing the eponymous lyric, "Everything's Turning to White."¹

Jindabyne retells Carver's story of a fishing trip and the macabre discovery of the body of a dead girl. This time the setting is Australian; indeed, the references to Australian locations are signposted to the point of overvaluation. *Jindabyne's* famous water, so much of it in this time of drought in New South Wales, and its electrical currents flow through the film as it spirals outwards, infecting the local community with Carver's powerful tale of breakdown. And as Carver's story pours out





through *Jindabyne*, *Jindabyne* pours into it. The open-and-shut case of intertextual exchange that is this remake of “So Much Water So Close to Home” allows for a certain rewriting of the story’s potential. Open-and-shut case, so agreed my students when I asked them about this during a course on the theory and praxis of intertextuality. It emerged that for them intertextuality was a way of restaging a story, of reusing a set of signifiers so that viewers, in this case, could enjoy the film because they were ‘in on the joke.’ If *Jindabyne* is successful, I argued, it is also because of the way in which it uses intertextuality to promote its own textuality, to showcase itself as film (*Jindabyne* is, after all, less town than text within the film, a constant and deep-flowing *mise en abyme*). In short, intertextuality works as long as it remains a tool at the disposal of the reader, and not merely a device used by an author. And by ‘works’ we imply ‘is productive of’ critical discourse rather than of a finite number of self-contained and self-founding references. Such criticism, of course, runs the risk of coinciding with poststructuralism. Tilottama Rajan, for one, argues against such a “deconstructive version of intertextuality”, criticizing the way in which “it ‘merges intertextuality with textuality,’ in effect reducing the former to the latter” (63).

In this essay, we shall seek to understand what it is about Carver’s short stories that makes Rajan’s defence of intertextuality as something separate from deconstructive reading and self-reflexive textuality so problematic. Indeed, we hope to show that the dead body of “So Much Water So Close to Home”, the ‘it’ of “Fat” and the body of the fat man himself owe their very ambiguity to the ineluctable coincidence of the singularity of the individual work and the quasi-infinite plurality of its potential readings. It is for this reason, we should suggest, that parallels can be drawn between Julia Kristeva’s one intertext, Michel Riffaterre’s limited number of compulsory intertexts and the multiplicity of Gilles Deleuze’s rhizome. The reading of Carver’s stories is both inside and outside, a text forged at the interface of reader and work because of the active involvement of both, which in the case of the work often lies in a seductive display of passivity. To textuality and intertextuality will thus be added sexuality, the work’s flirtatious demand that the reader inscribe





meaning into it. This will then be a story of control and the passionate battle between a work and its reader both to gain and lose control of the text and, ultimately, of themselves.

Kelly's lyric "When he holds me now, I'm pretending" exposes this interplay of control. Who's holding whom here? The song is sung by a man, which initially prompts the listener to associate the first-person singular with a male perspective; and yet, this, and other songs, from this album, have a feminine first person. This can be easily dismissed as a narrative trick; it is nonetheless one that appeals to the intertext inasmuch as it brings together authorial design and the reader's interpretation. In this case, the author holds the reader until the reader realises his or her mistake. In the song 'he' is doing the holding, but 'I' is pretending. So whom or what does 'he' hold? Is it not rather 'I' that holds him via a strategy of feigned emotion? There are, of course, two acts here: one of holding and the other of being held. This can be translated easily onto the dynamics of reading: the work holds the reader's attention, but the reader holds the work. The question becomes one of appropriating or deliberately ceding the perspective of the first person.

In his introduction to the collection of Carver's short stories *Short Cuts* (the book of the film, as it were) Robert Altman describes how these works "[are] more about what you don't know than what you do know, and the reader fills in the gaps, while recognising the undercurrents" (7). Unless the reader recognises the undercurrents, which he or she may or may not deem to have been put there by the author, they will not appear to be present; it is thus the reader that is responsible for whether they are there (and, logically or illogically, whether they were ever there at all). This is a necessary consequence of intertextuality. So when Altman writes that "Raymond Carver made poetry out of the prosaic" (*Short Cuts*, 7) it seems fair to say that Carver's poetic intent was to lay a foundation so prosaically empty that the reader would be forced to poeticise it. By pretending to be poetic he forces the reader to make poetry (at which point the reader extols the poetry and refuses to believe that the author was pretending at all).

The vehicle for these reading/writing dynamics in "So Much Water





So Close to Home" is the dead body of the girl. As the protagonist Claire points out: "'That's the point,' I say. 'She was dead. But don't you see? She needed help'" (*Short Cuts*, 70). The girl is dead; she has, in the words of Kelly's song, turned white. This whiteness is, however, a dangerous loss of subjectivity. It is a Trojan horse in reverse, an empty vessel just waiting to be filled with meaning that will appear *a posteriori* to have come naturally out of it. And if the death of the girl is pure whiteness, it must be filled by those who find it, who then in turn take up its tragic tale. This is how the virus of the girl's death is spread. For as Paul Kelly points out, "everything turns to white" and the dead girl's lack of voice cries louder than any living subjectivity, demanding the active participation of all those who come into contact with her (no longer the 'it' that death surely ought to confer upon the lifeless body). Claire goes on to assume the stance of the writerly reader, actively drowning herself in the text (become water). Her husband Stuart's readerly interpretation of events (he reads the story for what it is □ it is just a dead body □ then puts the book down and goes fishing) prompts Claire to assume the role of the dead story in order to engage him as critical reader.² As a story is dead until the reader can actively resuscitate it, she goes limp in his arms, feigning repulsion at his cold, readerly touch. Thus when he holds her, she is indeed pretending (not to want his touch). She maintains her resemblance to the dead girl, drowning in her role, until her husband finally wakes up and possesses her with all the warmth of his subjectivity.

In the shorter version of the story (as published in *What We Talk About When We Talk About Love*) this ending is all the more sudden and arresting:

He reaches an arm around my waist and with his other hand he begins to unbutton my jacket and then he goes on to the buttons of my blouse.

"First things first," he says.

He says something else. But I don't need to listen. I can't hear a thing with so much water going.

"That's right," I say, finishing the buttons myself. "Before Dean comes. Hurry."

(*What We Talk About*, 87-88)

When Stuart's advances reach the level of the assault that is her reading





of the other girl's death, Claire finally stops pretending and joins her husband in his active critical interpretation of the body (of the text). By soliciting the writerly reading of the reader, Claire has brought the dead girl/text back to life. To drown, rape and desire become conjugations of a single active verb, 'to read'.

This resurrection / contamination reading of "So Much Water So Close to Home" adopts Roland Barthes's poststructuralist concept of the opposition of the readerly (*le lisible*) and writerly (*le scriptible*) text.³ Stuart's reaction to the whiteness of the body recalls the readerly approach to the text whereby the reader reads the text for what it is: a story. Stuart's approach to reading is paralleled by his eating habits, as outlined in the opening line of the shorter version: "My husband eats with a good appetite. But I don't think he's really hungry. He chews, arms on the table, and stares at something across the room" (*What We Talk About*, 79). Such a reader momentarily cedes subjectivity to the text, losing his or her self for the duration of the tale, after which all returns to normal and the book is returned to the shelf. In this way, although the book is read, it is never brought back to life; it is simply read in terms of its own creative death, i.e. completion of the creative work as death of creativity (and end of meaning at the interface of author and text). For Claire the consignment of the words to the page, whereby "everything turns to white," is a more positive death: the page is emptied and needs to be refilled. Her reading, according to which the girl was violated, is brought to life. This is the beauty of the dead text, which needs all the warmth of the reader to become living. It also corresponds to Barthes's writerly engagement with the text, whose life begins again and forever with the death of the author. In such an analysis, the work's textuality cannot be divorced from its intertextuality. By pretending, by feigning death, the text forces its completion in the reader's writing of its otherness and its interconnectedness to other texts.⁴

It is interesting that critics should find in Carver's minimalism a textual nature that owes nothing to poststructuralism. In defending Carver's minimalist shorter version of "So Much Water So Close to Home" Günter Leypoldt analyses the text's opening out in terms far removed from those argued above: "In most of Carver's minimalist stories, the





resulting silence is a subtle quieting of the voice that opens up the text's referentiality without subverting it altogether, emerging more casually and unassumingly than in the modernist or postmodernist traditions" (321). Leypoldt offers a reading of Claire's unexpected reaction to Stuart's advances (made entirely predictable by our interpretation) which hinges upon a concept of intertextuality predicated upon the difference and exteriority of the intertexts used to open the host text. This is intertextuality as advocated by Tilottama Rajan, for whom our reading of the merging of the dead girl's story into Claire's would be classified intratextual: "It should be clear also how intertextuality differs from the 'intratextuality' practiced by the Yale School, which creates an intersection of textual surfaces that blurs the boundary between outside and inside" (63-64). Leypoldt goes outside Carver's story, finding the clues to a persuasive reading in the works of James M. Cain and Thomas Hardy. He is able to parallel "Claire's emphatic identification with the dead girl floating in the Naches River" with "Cora's erotic fear" in Cain's *The Postman Always Rings Twice* because of the way in which both instances are "motivated by a comparably erotic element" (337). The openness of Carver's story is explained, according to Leypoldt, by and through its oscillation between two external intertexts, the other being Hardy's *Jude the Obscure*:

[...] in accord with the poetics of minimalism, Claire's symbolic rape resonates with both Sue Bridehead's and Cora Papadakis's situations, letting the text fluctuate in rich metaphorical undercurrents below the representations of the quotidian, without however pressing either of them toward a conclusion. As a result, the revised ending prevents semantic univocality as much as it provides a certain referentiality. (338)

We should agree with Leypoldt that such use of intertextuality serves to reflect the potential openness of the shorter version, in comparison with the more visibly delimited longer version. We should, however, maintain that this openness is inherent in Carver's text, dramatically so in the shorter version.

The reticence with which critics have received deconstructive readings of Carver's work seems to stem from the idea that postmodernism in some way precludes communication. This would explain the opposition seen by Christof Decker (between caricatural postmodern





constructs and characters invested – be it by reader or writer – with psychological depth) in his analysis of the gaze in Carver's short stories. According to Decker, "what to some critics appeared to be a variant of postmodern depthlessness is in fact an inability to communicate" (37). In order to defend the possibility of reading "So Much Water So Close to Home" through a version of intertextuality that hinges upon the work's self-reflexivity, we shall consider another story, "Fat," from the same perspective. For the postmodernism of "Fat" is a simulacrum of depthlessness and its miscommunication only surface deep. The two stories are also linked by the theme of drowning: whilst Claire drowns vicariously in the murky textual otherness of the girl's body, the narrator of "Fat" drowns intertextually in the implication of her debt to the legend of Hero and Leander.⁵ In Carver's story Leander is the name of the waiter who introduces water to the fat man's table; as such he brings the waters of the Hellespont to the story, and with them the death by drowning of Hero whose suicide is prompted by the news of her lover Leander's death (again by drowning).

A deconstructive reading doubles the depth of the text by engaging the reader as another presence always already inside the story. When Decker himself argues that "[Carver's stories] introduce the theme of visualization not as an end in itself but as part of a desire to communicate" (36), he must accept that the ultimate object of the gaze in the text is the text itself. Decker's "disjunction between voice and eye, speaking and looking" (35) is paralleled by the disjunction between the text and its external intertextual sources and, indeed, that between the text and itself. Accordingly, the following reading of "Fat" will correspond both to an idea of intertextuality, as an appeal to another specified and external text, and to intratextuality as the tendency of both particular texts and all text to become one with the work that the reader is holding.

The idea of textual disjunction raises the possibility of a re-examination of the concept of intimacy between characters and between text and reader. In "Fat" the work's very openness and the way it spreads beyond the limits of its own diegetic space provide a heightened degree of textual intimacy and an intensification of the erotics of reading. In their reading





of Carver's "Intimacy" Frank Bramlett and David Raabe suggest that the mechanics of intimate conversation are such that "[...] when a couple like the one in the story is very intimate – or was previously – then a lot of what is communicated is unsaid" (191). In "Fat," on the other hand, the story provides a close-up on what is said, with gestures and visual prompts contributing to the dialogue. And yet, things are more complicated than this. In the very first line of "Fat" allusion is made to a previous conversation that is referred to simply as 'it.' At no stage in the story, however, is it made clear what 'it' is.⁶ As will be seen, there is in fact a way in which what has been said is anywhere and everywhere but here. For interpersonal relations do not function in the same way in "Fat" as in "Intimacy". For one thing, the narratee of the tale, Rita, is explicitly named whereas in "Intimacy" anonymity is maintained on both sides: "[...] the homodiegetic narrator, in spinning this tale ['Intimacy'], develops a narratological intimacy with an unnamed narratee at the same time that he conveys the incident with his ex-wife" (Bramlett and Raabe, 178-79).⁷ In "Fat" the reader does not gatecrash this narratological construction of intimacy; instead he or she is invited into a readymade intimacy where much has been said and done, and whose mechanics have been turned to white, reduced to the page on which any writerly reading must be made.

The subject of "Fat" explodes into the story in the first line not once but twice: "I am sitting over coffee and cigarets at my friend Rita's and I am telling her about it" (197). Throughout the story Carver's 'I' will draw attention to itself by showcasing this first-person pronoun whose status as single is continually exposed by the more overtly striking plural (we) of the fat man's subjectivity. This double (plural) underscoring of singularity in the narrator's case, echoed later by the concept of singularity as always already plural in the case of the fat man, has the immediate effect of positing the background of "Fat" against the cohabitation of Barthes's pleasurable text: "The subject gains access to bliss by the cohabitation of languages working side by side" (*The Pleasure of the Text*, 4). That is to say that the erotics of the narrator's desire to be filled or completed is embedded in a natural tendency of all text to express its singularity in the





only way open to it: the work is produced by a writer who is a reader of text and is made text by a reader who is always already a readerly consumer (and writerly producer) of other text(s). The pleasure Barthes sees in this process hinges upon the essential *jouissance* of the communicative act.⁸ Any utterance made by a speaker can only make sense inasmuch as it is interpreted (given meaning) by an interlocutor; as such, language itself, even as it gives verbal expression to what we as speakers 'mean', escapes beyond our control very much in the same way as consciousness itself always flees the human Being for-itself in such studies of intentionality as Jean-Paul Sartre's *Being and Nothingness*. And just as in existentialist ontology our very being is frozen beyond our reach by the gaze of the Other, the meaning of our use of human language is captured and (de/re)constructed by its recipients. The ramifications for the written work of such philosophical and linguistic alienation are easy to predict, and poststructuralist and postmodern criticism hinge on what may be termed this dissolution of the identity of the subject. As Lauren Berlant notes, "[t]he aspiration to represent, imagine, and experience the condition of postidentity is indeed the meat of 'Fat'" (157). For Berlant the story of "Fat" satisfies the somewhat paradoxical motives of its narrator, who weaves a tale around herself in order to "establish for her[self] a point of view from which she will see the horizons of her own imminent self-expression. In other words, she tells the story to gain a space of happy estrangement from her self-identity" (157). As such the intertextual subject plays an active role, self-reflexively handing over of its privileged position of power in the meaning-making process; this is the enjoyment of the loss of identity, or *jouissance* from the perspective of the text itself.

Not only does "Fat" demonstrate self-referentiality or an awareness of its fundamental textuality, i.e. its dependence on its reader for the generation of meaning, it also appears very much to flaunt its wares. The grounding of textual identity not in construction but in loss is paralleled by the narrator's appeal to that other Other, not the reader but the intertext by whose shadow any work is more or less demonstrably haunted. When Carver's narrator refers to itself by means of a pronoun, the reader is content to wait for keys to its identity. This is a first-person





narrative, and we adopt the narrative perspective. When, on the other hand, the building blocks of the story are also replaced with a pronoun ("I am telling her about *it*" □ our emphasis), the reader is summoned to question just what 'it' is. What is 'it' standing in place of? The following line gives a partial (both veiling and satiating) answer: "Here is what I tell her" (197). The narrator is about to tell a tale that both reveals and conceals 'it'. And whilst there is clearly a way in which the tale is what it is that the narrator tells Rita, the words do not equate precisely to the 'it' *about which* she is talking to Rita. After all, as we learn later, these words, which congeal into the story "Fat", are not all there is: "Rudy, he is fat, I say, but that is not the whole story" (199).

Logically, a pronoun refers *back* to a previously uttered noun. This automatically locates the centre of meaning beyond the utterance of the narrative subject. Here other texts, or the intertext, can be shown to provide the background to the tale. The following lines provide a glimpse of what 'it' may be said to be:

*I envy them their public love. I myself have only known it in secret, shared
it in secret and longed, aw longed to show it – to be able to say out loud
what they have no need to say at all... (Jazz, 264)*

Whereas Carver begins his story with an explosion of first-person subjectivity, Toni Morrison closes her novel *Jazz* with the stunning revelation that the narrative voice (the heretofore eclipsed I – or eye – of the novel) is not satisfied simply to act as a portal through which the reader can disappear into the story; instead it reveals that it has been watching the reader by whose reading it has been brought to life. The reader is faced with the evidence that his or her engagement with the novel has produced an interactive, living reading experience or 'text.' Unlike the abstract, two-dimensional characters of the story who are clearly impervious to the need to say anything at all, the creation of text is an act of communication, and its voice lies at the interface of the written words and the reader, right where the latter's hands are as he or she reads. The narrator's use of the reflexive pronoun 'myself' provocatively suggests a way in which the text might create an objectivity for itself; the space in which the body of the text is constructed is, however, a secret space, an





intimate space like the one described in the immediately preceding pages of the novel, in which two lovers become one body together, replacing each other's me with a myself. The difference between I and myself, which Sartre describes as the very nothingness that situates us all in the world, resembles the way in which Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari's wasp and orchid deterritorialize themselves and reterritorialize the other, thereby becoming one in a rhizome:

The orchid deterritorializes by forming an image, a tracing of a wasp; but the wasp reterritorializes on that image. The wasp is nevertheless deterritorialized, becoming a piece in the orchid's reproductive apparatus. But it reterritorializes the orchid by transporting its pollen. Wasp and orchid, as heterogeneous elements, form a rhizome. [...] [This is] not imitation at all but a capture of code, surplus value of code, an increase in valence, a veritable becoming, a becoming-wasp of the orchid and a becoming-orchid of the wasp. Each of these becomings brings about the deterritorialization of one term and the reterritorialization of the other; the two becomings interlink and form relays in a circulation of intensities pushing the deterritorialization ever further. (10)

In this way, then, the voice of the text and the reader of the text fuse: the I of the text is always already becoming reader, and the reader is always already becoming text. And perversely, this coming together is made possible because of the very difference between the two entities (after all, only conscious beings can reanimate dead bodies, and only bodies that have a specific way of simulating death can offer themselves up for seduction).⁹ The reader facilitates the text's potential for otherness, or what Barthes refers to as its difference, a concept that Barbara Johnson describes in the following terms: "[...] a text's difference is not its uniqueness, its special identity. It is the text's way of differing *from itself*" (175). "Fat," for example, looks in one direction and speaks in another. It, and the concept of 'it' raised in the opening line, unspeaks itself. As Decker suggests, "talking leads to alienation from the self and others, while looking or touching creates a feeling of closeness and sometimes even a sense of empathy" (38). In Decker's opinion the gaze of Carver's apparently inarticulate characters "produces a kind of knowledge on which the sense of their interiority can build" (37); we should like to extend





this reasoning along our wilfully postmodern axis, suggesting that the act of looking (at dead bodies and hands holding coffee) implies a non-articulated but nonetheless far from inarticulate desire for the character's interiority to *be built*, and thus made exteriority, by the natural alterity of the self-reflexive text. Textual voyeurism becomes a rather coquettish appeal on the part of the disassembled subjectivity of the 'I' of "Fat" to be remade by the (de/re)constructive gaze of the reader. The opening line of "Fat" both talks and looks; it contains an explicit and implicit act of communication. It both leads the reader into the text and exposes the text's outside (via its appeal to its reader); it is thus revelling in its difference from itself. Through the concept of this difference it is possible to develop the "importance of haptic forms of communication, primarily touching," which Decker sees in Carver's exploitation of "seeing with eyes closed" (46). Via the inference that Rita and I are both touching coffee and cigarets, the reader visualizes (is forced to visualize by the elliptic nature of the description) a scene in which these objects vehiculate metonymically an act of haptic communication between the two characters. This contact through metonymy functions as a middle-ground and expresses a need for external interpretation. As such, the opening line of "Fat" is an assisted, negotiated intimacy, simultaneously inward and outward looking.

The intimacy of "Fat" is one based on the attraction of difference, a plural expression of a singular identity and vice versa. This erotics of the reading experience, this sexual union predicated upon the joint loss and mingling of identities, is the 'it' that Morrison's narrator longs to show:

That I have loved only you, surrendered my whole self reckless to you and nobody else. That I want you to love me back and show it to me. That I love the way you hold me, how close you let me be to you. I like your fingers on and on, lifting, turning. I have watched your face for a long time now, and missed your eyes when you went away from me. Talking to you and hearing you answer – that's the kick. (264 – original emphasis)

Talking becomes the ultimate erotic experience; the becoming of the text is the point of the whole novel: its bond with the reader is erotic inasmuch as it joins the two in an act of intensity that is both specific to each reader and which extends to the anonymity of all readers. I is both





itself and another.¹⁰ For Morrison's *I* does not preclude an extension of this intimacy beyond the covers of *Jazz*; indeed, if the intimacy of this textual union is what 'it' is about, then it is clear that the pleasure that comes with the submitting of subjectivity must transcend the localised bonding between a reader and a particular instance of text. If text can be made in the reading process, then it can be remade infinitely: "If I were able I'd say it. Say make me, remake me. You are free to do it and I am free to let you because look, look. Look where your hands are. Now" (265). And when our reading hands open the pages of Raymond Carver's "Fat", it is this 'it' that is being freely done and said. The story that is about to be told is about a desire for intimacy to be voiced, for private thoughts to be realised in the public domain; for I and we to become one in the erotic space of Morrison's myself.

Intertextually, the end of *Jazz* spills into the opening of "Fat" through the caress of the reader. A reader who comes to the latter via the former must be conscious of where his or her hands are *now*. This now reinforces the simultaneity expressed in the rhizome. Intertextual links are not unidirectional; the chronology of the acts of reading and writing become irrelevant. *Jazz* and "Fat" reflect each other, are one together intertextually, which is highlighted by the circularity of Carver's story. The ending of "Fat" is an expression of becoming and beginning, and the last sentence suggests a textual awakening, a realization of Morrison's bond with the reader: "I feel it" (200). And it is in this parallel moment of climactic closure that the hands of the text are again revealed: "She sits there waiting, her dainty fingers poking her hair. *Waiting for what?* I'd like to know" (200).¹¹ The moment of becoming text that joins the reading and narrative subjectivities in both *Jazz* and "Fat" involves the lifting and poking of fingers, the concept of waiting, the expression of 'it' and the hushed whisper of italics.

Thus far it has been established that two texts, albeit two highly self-referential texts each more than comfortable with its intertextuality, can be seen to reflect each other's expression of a bond with the reader that has been referred to as 'it'. This is interesting insofar as it goes, but an intertextual reading must allow the reader of "Fat" to say something





about the story that would otherwise remain unsaid. Whilst the story is not 'it' in this reading of the text – 'it' being the bond with the reader (of text) – there is nonetheless a way in which the story is designed to retell 'it', to stand in place of 'it' subtly and gently so that the reader will not be scared away by too much too soon. If 'it' is a moment of orgasmic release, then the story, "Fat", is all about the caress.

But who is the object of the narrative subject's caress? The intertextual reading we have offered here of the ending of *Jazz* suggests that the reader, or giver of the caress, becomes the receiver of an intense moment of intimacy with the book; the resulting abandonment of each autonomous subjectivity (reader and book) produces text. This textuality can and must be remade between all readers and all books. Morrison's descriptions of the intimacy of human relations are ultimately both entries into the private and explosions into the public spheres. In this light, the desire of Carver's 'I' is to create an intimate and confessional bond (with the reader) and a public outing of personal feelings (via the story of the fat man). The structural device used to sustain these parallel and ostensibly mutually exclusive aims is Rita.

Without the specific lens of this intertextual reading, the appropriateness of Rita's name may pass unnoticed. For "I am sitting over coffee and cigarets at my friend Rita's and I am telling her about it", we should like to posit: "I (the voice of "Fat") am bound in an intimate relationship with you the reader" (where Rita equals reader).¹² The feelings that I wishes to impart to the reader, the desire to produce a bond that we can refer to as the production of text, are embodied in the fat character of I's story. The extraneous element of the opening line (if we remove I, the reader and 'it') is the "coffee and cigarets." These are transposed into the story through the first thing to which our attention is drawn: "[...] it is the fingers I remember best" (197). And if they "look three times the size of a normal person's fingers", it is precisely because they are made up of three consumable adjectives: "long, thick, creamy" (197). The I of the story within the story is staring at fingers that are linked to coffee and cigarets; we already know that the I of the first line is sharing coffee and cigarets with Rita, which suggests that I is staring either at her own or at





Rita's fingers. The ambiguity is suggestive of the way that the individual subjectivities of reader and work fuse in the rhizomic text, i.e. I is looking at the fingers of Morrison's 'myself', where the text is both subject and object of reading. This is reinforced by the self-referentiality of the later production of the Caesar salad, which I makes "there at his table, him watching my every move" (197); the site of production and consumption combine in an intimate and public display. I and the fat man both watch and are watched, by each other and the implicit Other that is played by the clientele and staff of the restaurant (who stand as readers, albeit readerly ones, in the text). It is clear, however, that the whole scene is served up for the other Other that is the reader of "Fat" (and who is presented metaphorically by the story's extras). As the fat man makes his puffing noise, we readers hear the cigarets that are infusing our moment with I with a smokily staged sensuality. The fat man's use of the pronoun 'we' also clearly serves to draw I into the singular plurality of the text, whilst I and Rudy only once form a 'we', and it is one that comprises "Rudy and me" (199), a distinctly plural plural that is both patently subject (Rudy) and object (me).

Before I returns home to the disjointed domestic relationship with Rudy, the latter makes a comment that does not directly refer to the fat man's size. Indeed, Rudy's role otherwise seems wholly predicated on proliferating descriptions of the fat man and stories about fat. He is, in other words, a pure function of the story in the story. This different, privileged comment extends beyond the *mise en abyme*, penetrating into the story proper: "I'm getting jealous, Rudy says to Joanne" (199). Such an uncharacteristic remark, if stripped of its dry irony, can be redirected and interpreted as an appeal made by I to Rita. I is making us readers jealous, and we (the royal, fat, writerly I) are, indeed, jealously attached to our (critical reading of this) union with the narrator. In Rudy's case there are grounds for jealousy; for, having delivered the fat man's desert, I notes that "a feeling comes over me" (199). I's objectivity in relation to the feeling brings on an outpouring of desire; the repetition of the pronoun lifts I out of objectivity into a string of singular subjects that long to be conjugated in the plural: "Me, I eat and I eat and I can't gain, I say. I'd





like to gain, I say." The fat man's comment closes the amorous plot with a reminder that he himself is only a predicate of the title, like Rudy, with insufficient psychological depth to extend beyond the confines of his tale: "No, he says. If we had a choice, no. But there is no choice. Then he picks up his spoon and eats" (199). Karlsson notes that "[...] the story about the fat man's excessive meal has no punch-line, no climax" (146). This gentle eclipsing of the fat man seems appropriate in the context of this reading of "Fat;" for it is precisely through the emptiness of the characters' words and the discomfiture of their silence that the text implores the words of the reader and voices its undercurrent of desire. Indeed, again to quote Karlsson: "[Carver's] characters are surrounded by silences that tell us more about the absence that permeates their lives than any spoken word could ever communicate" (145).

The end of the love story within the *mise en abyme* has, however, served I's purpose. An emotion, be it jealousy or simply keen interest, has been provoked: "What else? Rita says, lighting one of my cigarets and pulling her chair closer to the table. This story's getting interesting now, Rita says" (199). The relationship between Rita and I has taken on a greater degree of intensity. The reference to the cigarets pulls us sharply back into the foreground of "Fat." We as readers are summoned to work, to produce a writerly reading of this deliberately ambiguous scenario: for whom is Rita lighting the cigaret? What else does she want? Where are her hands now? The story is interesting *now* because it is self-referentially staging the production of text.¹³

"Fat" ends with the use of Rudy's simple tale about fat people and their titles, which serves as a further reminder that I's story of the fat man is just such a tale, "but that is not the whole story" (199). The story becomes whole when I kills off her characters in a dual revelation: "When he gets on me, I suddenly feel I am fat. I feel I am terrifically fat, so fat that Rudy is a tiny thing and hardly there at all" (200). On one level this statement is a rejection of not only Rudy, but any need for Rudy. Rudy is another dead body, a character in a story that only has one purpose: to become text.¹⁴ This is a show of strength and of independence; it marks I's completion, a plenitude of I based on pure repetition. And on another level, this remark





is a request for plurality made by a co-dependent, albeit from a position of strength not previously seen in the story. The desire for I to become we has until this point been reflected in the fat man; now the desire for completion is a call for Rita to join I in the pleasure of the text. This is the revelation of *Jazz*: I is expressing pure textuality.

But does the reader get it? Rita has heard the story and laid her hands on I's cigarettes. Her reading, however, appears readerly in the extreme: "That's a funny story, Rita says, but I can see she doesn't know what to make of it" (200). In the face of this rejection of the intimacy of the Rita-I couple, I "feel[s] depressed", admitting that she has revealed too much before this object of desire. But, of course, that is just the point: Rita is a reader-in-the-text, an object put there to remind the reader-of-the-text of the impossibility of avoiding writerly engagement. I has gone to great lengths to expose the mechanisms by which the barest of narrative bones are made flesh by the caress of the reader. Whether Raymond Carver's I has gone too far or not, Toni Morrison's I is there, in the ending of "Fat" to recall the inevitable plurality of future remakes. Reading potential waits for readers to remake text. Fingers "daintily poking [her] hair" ("Fat", 200) will caress other texts, and other fingers will take their place. Being chosen to wait is the reason they can.

Intertextuality is the way in which texts come alive. Not content to await the caress of the reader, to lie idly by whilst the reader prepares to read works into text, text is always already present, always already soliciting our touch. This is why the ending of "Fat" is anything but. If the closing sentences – "My life is going to change. I feel it." – resemble a beginning, it is quite simply because that is what they are; or rather there are no more clear-cut endings or openings, just 'it', the more or less visibly seamed continuity of the intertext.

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Notes

- 1 These two Australian reflections on Carver's short story are themselves joined by Kelly's role in the film's soundtrack.
- 2 Claire appears to engage, from inside the text, in what Thomas H. Kane refers to as automortography. She reifies herself, killing herself off as a signifier in order that her husband should infer her meaning and construct her will. She thus possesses him from beyond the watery grave that is, in fact, not her own but that of the drowned girl. In discussing Alice Munro's "Open Secrets" Kane states his interest in "how a person becomes objectified, and then how that object seems to take on intention or 'free will'" (421).
- 3 These terms are defined in Barthes's famous essay *S/Z*; they spring from the idea that a text's meaning is not set in stone and that, since the notorious death of the author, meaning is something to be written in by the reader.
- 4 It should be remembered that prolific authors, including Jean-Paul Sartre, often owe their output to a quasi-pathological fear of the white page. The trauma faced by the reader of a congealed piece of writing is akin to the reaction of the writer when faced with this need to write. The reader must pose the question "what do I understand this writing to mean?" Where there is silence or absence, the reader must act as writer in order to fill the void; the reader and writer are both called upon to perform the same task when faced with the whiteness of completion, complete presence in the first instance and complete absence in the second. As Fachard notes, "[t]he inconclusive nature of Carver's work demands that the reader be brought into the writer's elucidating process" (27).





- 5 I am indebted to Vasiliki Fachard who points out the link to Hero and Leander in his excellent analysis of "Fat," which concentrates on the textuality and corporeality of the story whereas the present essay is more closely concerned with the openness, and thus intertextuality, of Carver's work.
- 6 For Claire Maniez this is a "cataphoric *it*"; it is not clear, however, that 'it' refers forwards anymore than it refers backwards, i.e. anaphorically. Of a later usage of 'it', which for us is the same one, she notes how "the pronoun *it* does not seem to refer to any specific element in the text" (12). Hence the need to extend the text outwards: neither cataphoric nor anaphoric, this is an intertextual *it*. Our interpretation of 'it' is maintained in spite of the penultimate line of the story which states simply: "It is August" (200). If this is what 'it' is, then it is difficult to explicate this further without recourse to the intertext. Fachard suggests that the idea of August appeals to another piece by Carver, "Augustine Notebooks", in which coffee and the remembrance of beginnings serve to posit the last line of "Fat" as the first line, or opening, of the text's otherness (cf. Fachard, 28).
- 7 We should agree with Fachard's observation that "[i]f she and the fat man have no name [...] it is because they both are functions of textuality" (30). Fachard sees the textuality of "Fat" "ensomatized in the Botero-like figure" of the fat man (28); in this reading it is rather the rhizomic exchange of 'I' and the fat man (the becoming fat of the thin body) that embodies the story's (inter)textuality.
- 8 The term *jouissance* is closer in French to the term orgasm in English than the terms 'pleasure' or 'bliss'. The pleasure of textual production is thus linked to a loss of subjectivity, or 'little death'.
- 9 To continue the link to the Sartrean consciousness, the Being for-itself is connected to the world around it by the very stuff that distances it from everything there is (including its own body). Nothingness is a presence, infinitely small, which recalls the thinness of the page that acts as the barrier between work and reader, without which the two could not combine in textual osmosis.
- 10 As Mary Orr points out, Julia Kristeva's analysis of text reveals the ways in which it is different from what *it* is: "For Kristeva, text of any kind is not a vehicle of information ('the *that* which it signifies'), but so many forms of reflexive and hence 'poetic' language [...] in co-operation" (30). This resembles our deconstructive reading of the singular plurality and plural singular of I and the fat man, who are both, to use, Kristeva's terms, strange to themselves.
- 11 For Ann-Marie Karlsson the openendedness of the story is reflected through a continually silenced – and thus voiced – lack of closure: "[Details] act as physically present tokens of absence, silence and secretiveness. [...] What we expect to be communicated is left out, remains silent, and what we encounter is insufficient, incomplete, gives neither an opening nor a closure" (147).
- 12 Fachard, too, picks up on Rita's role as reader whose function, he states, "is designated through a slight slurring of her name" (28).
- 13 Maniez notes how Rita's inclusion in the story reinforces the demands made by Carver's tale on the reader: "By introducing in the story a figure of the unresponsive reader, Carver underlines the reader's role in the production of textual meaning" (13).
- 14 Berlant reads the narrator's erasure of Rudy in sexual terms: "Fat, she imagines, usurps the place of heterosexuality; it supervenes the place of embodied exchange not through abstraction but through superembodiment; it casts the shadow of its belly on the sexo-semiotic of sexual difference, and eradicates a man in the process" (162). According to our reading, the expression of "Fat," as a story within a story, replaces Rudy's role as prop with the writerly desire of the reader; the sex act is thus a mere metaphor for the locus of erotic exchange that is the text "Fat" itself. Berlant will go on to explain the text's plural singularity through the motif of pregnancy, which she considers a "superpersonality" whereby the narrator simultaneously denies and celebrates her private space: "the model of fat agency is entirely public and yet also represents a mystical or magical interiority" (163).

